

THE PARTY OF BIDEN WOULDN'T GET CARTER

OCTOBER 3, 2024 | JOEL SCHLOSBERG | 0 COMMENTS



Mark Hamill as Doobie from ABC-TV's *The Texas Wheelers*, before he set out for his better-known role on a farm. Public domain.

Jimmy Carter is garnering more attention for becoming a centenarian on October 1 than he did when he was the first former president of the USA to celebrate a 96th birthday. Yet what thin hope I held in 2020 that the Democratic candidate might "follow Carter's deregulatory path" seems even more distant from a party that will have further lost its way even if it defeats Donald Trump's second bid at re-election. (A September *Wall Street Journal* opinion headline noted that "Biden and Buttigieg are Reregulating the Airlines.")

Tom Tomorrow's [cover illustration](#) for Eric Alterman's *Why We're Liberals: A Political Handbook for Post-Bush America* found room for philosophical intellectuals like John Stuart Mill and John Dewey to lend support behind Ted Kennedy and Nancy Pelosi. 2024 Democrats are less likely to invoke either John than to ridicule opponents as spineless stooges for white supremacy and fascism (charges considered cheaply contemptible when hurled at the Michael Moore stand-in of *An American Carol* in 2008) or just plain "weird." *The New York Times* can only make one of the most popular taunts against Trump's running mate JD Vance fit to print by [referring](#) to it obliquely as "a vulgar, untrue joke." President Joe Biden and NYC mayor Eric Adams have fallen out of favor for personal failings rather than stale ideas.

Rick Perlstein's *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980* laments the public's shift away from New Hollywood "moral ambiguity, dark moods, [and] suffusing skepticism toward establishments of every description" to the "Old Hollywood pastiche" of the original *Star Wars* at the same time they abandoned the Carter who channeled Reinhold Niebuhr's suspicion of "a too-simple division of the world into lightness and dark" in favor of the star of *Knute Rockne All American*. A future historian covering the quadrennial since Perlstein's 2020 publication would find even less room for nuance. If anything, the lightness projected by a party purportedly devoted to "joy" is tempered by the bad vibes of anxiety threatening to overwhelm it (as literally happened onscreen in this summer's *Inside Out 2*).

Yet Perlstein's division of Hollywood into New and revanchist is itself oversimplified. The novelization of *Star Wars* portrays an emperor who fails to heed "the cries of the people for justice" not out of malice but due to being isolated from popular opinion by "assistants and boot-lickers he had appointed to high office." In the spinoff novels published during Carter's term, Alan Dean Foster described a Luke Skywalker who "reflected grimly [that] if there was one thing he was sure of it was that the callow youth he had once been was dead and dry as dust," while Brian Daley wrote of a young Han Solo whose seemingly "callous exterior" is realized to be a shield "from the derisions of fools and cowards" by an ally who warns that "in trying to preserve [one's] ideals, one risks losing them."

Let's hope that this galaxy's liberals learn a similar lesson before they divide the White House against liberalism in order to save it from conservatives.

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PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY